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EDITORIALS

Senate should pass the forest health bill

Rep. Greg Walden scored a big victory this week, and thanks to his efforts Central Oregon did, too. Maybe.

Walden and fellow Republican Scott McInnis of Colorado co-sponsored the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003, which won House approval Tuesday by a vote of 256 to 170. The legislation had the support of 42 Democrats and the president, whose signature is therefore a foregone conclusion.

To reach his desk, though, it must make its way through the Senate, where its chances are, well, who knows? A number of environmental groups are busy trying to convince the upper chamber that the bill will turn the nation's forests into stump farms.

It won't. What it will do is ensure that some of the forestland most at risk of catastrophic wildfire will be cleaned up before it burns up. The public will still have an opportunity to comment on proposed projects, and, in fact, will still have the ability to challenge them. By and large, the legislation simply streamlines the bureaucratic process.

Moreover, its scope is very, very limited. Due to unhealthy forest conditions, about 190 million acres are at unnaturally high risk of catastrophic wildfire or insect or disease infestation. The legislation — a pilot program of sorts — applies to only 20 million acres. What's so bad about giving

it a chance, compiling data and scrutinizing the results?

Pardon our cynicism, but we wonder if environmental extremists oppose the bill precisely because it might work. If it does, Congress might agree to apply the management approach more broadly, depriving the hands-off crowd of the appeal-and-sue strategy that's helped turn forests into such fire traps.

We hope the Senate — especially the members from Oregon — has better sense than to fall prey to the hysterical hyperbole of the likes of Oregon's own Peter DeFazio. According to *The New York Times*, the Democrat hollered on the House floor that the bill would encourage the felling of valuable old-growth trees. We're surprised he's forgotten all of the valuable old-growth trees that perished during last summer's wildfires.

Speaking of wildfires, timing could prove the act's most valuable ally in the Senate. According to the *Times*, the Senate Energy Committee is scheduled to take up the bill at the end of June, at the very time when wildfires are likely to begin erupting throughout the West. Those senators who share DeFazio's memory problems will be reminded, yet again, why Walden and McInnis worked so hard on the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, why dozens of Democrats in the House supported it, why the president is willing to sign it, and, most important, why those of us who live in fire country need it.